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AUTHOR Ochs, Donovan J.
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ABSTRACT

One frequently encounters innuendoes, charges, allegations, threats, and rationales of conspiracy in studying the role of rhetoric in social movements. While "full discussion of competing ideas," holds high repute, "people meeting to plot some action," is disreputable and under some conditions illegal. This paper focuses on existing definitions of conspiracy in the fields of law, sociology, and political science. The author distinguishes between real as opposed to fictional conspiracies. The paper also tries to answer three questions: (1) What are the philosophic bases of conspiracy? (2) What sorts of persons are prone to believe that a conspiracy exists? (3) And what criteria must be present before a conspiracy is credible? (Author/LG)

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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: A PLACE FOR CONSPIRACY

by
Donovan J. Ochs

(Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association National Convention, Chicago, December, 1972)

An honorable American custom has it that one should pay all debts before New Year's Eve. With only one day left, let me acknowledge my indebtedness to my colleague, John Bowers, for his insistence that I write this paper. And, I owe a special debt to Rita Alvis, my research assistant, who located and compiled more materials on conspiracy than I thought existed.

In studying the rhetorical messages within various reform movements, I notice what seems to be a rhetorical commonplace. Almost invariably, leaders of a reform movement will claim that a conspiracy exists and that this conspiracy is causing most of the problems which the movement will resolve. As all of us are well aware, the John Birch Society maintains that a Communist conspiracy exists and is methodically taking over our government. In the early years of the National Farm Workers Association, the leaders were convinced that the grape-growers had formed a conspiracy to prevent their efforts to secure collective bargaining.

Equally curious, the leaders of an establishment, when confronted with a reform movement, are likely to claim that a conspiracy is causing the turmoil. For example, officials in Iowa City during our campus riots in 1970 issued a number of statements suggesting that battle-hardened SDS activists from the

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University of Wisconsin were master-minding the destruction.

Depending on who you are and what you're reading, you may be familiar with so-called conspiracies such as these: the Communist conspiracy, the Jewish conspiracy, the Socialist conspiracy, the conspiracy of the Illuminati, the Papal conspiracy, the Rothschild conspiracy, the conspiracy to assasinate President Kennedy, the Watergate conspiracy, the Chicago 8 conspiracy, the Male Chauvinist conspiracy, the Feminist conspiracy, the Panther conspiracy, the FBI conspiracy to eliminate the Black Panthers, etc.[1] There would almost appear to be several conspiracies for every reform movement. But counting alleged conspiracies does not account for them.

Specifically in this paper, I want to account for the widespread use and apparent susceptibility of people in reform movements and in establishments to conspiracy appeals.

To do so, I propose to focus on these questions: What is a conspiracy? Are there some types of persons who are more likely to search out and discover conspiracies than others? And, how might a critic of reform movements distinguisn between actual conspiracies and psychological conspiracies?

By common definition, you and I would be conspirators if we met in the hotel lobby and agreed to steal a water pitcher from one of these meeting rooms. Even if we did not actually steal the pitcher, we <u>intended</u> to do so -- and that's conspiracy. Conspiracy involves two or more people agreeing to do an unlawful or wrong act.

In his essay entitled "The Development of the English Law of Conspiracy," J. W. Bryan notes that conspiracy was first written

into English law in 1305.[2] At that time, conspiracy was limited to secret agreements whose object was to hinder or pervert the administration of justice. In other words, conspiracy was restricted to instances of bringing false witness against innocent people in the law courts. In 1611, conspiracy was extended to protect the King against plots to overthrow him. Jason Epstein, in his book, The Great Conspiracy Trial details the next historic development:

> "By the nineteenth century, the theory of conspiracy in American law came to include "concerted actions to accomplish some purpose, not in itself criminal, by criminal means."[3]

Oddly enough Big Business further increased the scope of conspiracy law with the advent of federal regulations against price-fixing and unfair trusts. If a single company sets its prices to undercut and destroy the competition, that's fine. But if two companies combine -- and this joining together is the defining characteristic of conspiracy law -- if two companies combine to set prices, then the law says that a conspiracy has occured.

So then -- what is a conspiracy? Legally, it consists of two or more people combining to do something illegal. A reform movement by most definitions involves a group of people working together -- or we could say "combining" to bring about some change in existing beliefs, attitudes, customs, practices, policies, rules, laws, or I suppose, governments. Sometimes, as in the case of Father Groppi's efforts to integrate certain residential areas of Milwaukee in 1969, the reform movement is directed at changing existing

attitudes. It's not illegal for a white homeowner to think that black neighbors decrease property values -- it is foolish, unreasonable, unsubstantiated, and false but it is not illegal, legally. Father Groppi's organization could not be cited for conspiracy, but many white homeowners were convinced that the integrationists had conspired in the sense that a great danger existed to the value of their property. If a group of office workers meet over their lunch hour and collectively address a petition to their boss to add another water fountain to the office, I doubt whether any manager would consider that a conspiracy has taken place. Yet, the ingredients are clearly present -- two or more people combining to do something not illegal, but troublesome. On the other hand, let's hypothesize a group of people who want to change a law that says only folks with white skin can eat in public restaurants. To carry out this proposed reform, let's suppose this reform group decides to walk right into several restaurants, sit down at the lunch counters, and eat whatever food they brought with them. From the viewpoint of the restaurant owners, and formerly existing law, a crime and a conspiracy has taken place.

Let's reverse the coin. Assume that you are teaching a class. Within the context of the classroom, you are the establishment and you have a super-liberal rule that to pass your course all a student must do is take the final exam. Let's add two other factors: (1) There's also a college rule that you can be fired for giving blanket grades. And (2) an organization of students on your campus are trying to abolish grades. On the day of the exam, none of your

students show up. No explanations -- no phone calls. The point of my contrived example is this: Would you accept conspiracy as a reasonable explanation of the absence? I think so. Technically, a classroom rule doesn't have the status of a statutory, codified law, but the concerted action of these mythical students accomplished something akin to a crime -- a perceived and an imminent danger to you and your job.

Thus I offer an answer to the question: What is a conspiracy?

> Legally one needs three ingredients: (A) a group who by their concerted action (B) intended (C) to commit a crime. Practically -- and I'm tempted to say rhetorically -- when a person has reason to believe that a perceived and an imminent danger to himself is caused by the concerted actions of some group, for that person a conspiracy probably exists.

There is a loose concept in my practical definition of conspiracy -- the concept of person. To get at this notion, we need to ask -- are there some types of persons who are more likely to search out and discover conspiracies than others? The answers to this question depend on which authors one chooses to read.

> Talcott Parsons, a sociologist who studied the conspiracy appeals of Joseph McCarthy claims that people who were fearful of changing values easily accepted the "eastern liberal establishment" as the cause of their fear.[4]

Gary Allen, author of None Dare Call it Conspiracy, sounds his alarm against the "Insiders" the current descendants of the Rothschild conspiracy, to readers who fit this description. I quote here from his first chapter. "Something is bugging you, but you aren't sure what. We keep electing new Presidents who seemingly promise faithfully to halt the world-wide Communist advance, put the blocks to extravagant government spending, douse the fires of inflation, put the economy on an even keel, reverse the trend which is turning the country into a moral sewer, and toss the criminals into the hoosegow where they belong. Yet, despite high hopes and glittering campaign promises, these problems continue to worsen no matter who is in office."[5]

Sociologist Franz Neumann claims that a person is susceptible to conspiracy appeals if he belongs to a group which is threatened by a loss of status.[6] By way of illustration, David Carter, a doctoral candidate at Iowa who is currently studying the NFO movement reports that in much of the literature produced by the leaders of the National Farm Organization, the plight of the American farmer is attributed to, "international money."

Hans Toch uses the labels "authoritarian" and "ethnocentric" to describe the susceptible person;[7] Rokeach

reduces open-close mindedness to "the extent to which there is reliance on absolute authority;"[8] while Lipsett and Raab divide people into monist and pluralist camps with the monist camp being most susceptible to conspiracy appeals.[9]

Enough -- the immediate conclusion would seem to be this: Those who are susceptible to conspiracy appeals tend to be rigid, authoritarian, and anxious. But most people on some occasions would tend to fit these descriptors. And, because anyone tends to distort his perceptions of reality in the direction of his wishes and fears, then, in a situation when someone is rigid, authoritarian, or anxious and when confronted with a perceived and imminent danger he will probably distort his perceptions of events in the direction of his fears. For example, after the Chicago Convention riots of 1968 the City of Chicago released a film entitled, "What Trees Do They Plant." Before the convention, according to filmed interviews, authorities in the City of Chicago received word that the Yippies intended to put LSD in the city water supply. Mayor Daley perceived that a conspiracy was underway. Also, a few months ag[illegible]e Democratic Headquarters at Watergate were apparently bugged. George McGovern perceived that a conspiracy was underway.

The point that I'm stressing is this: One need not be a member of the Radical Right or Left or a psychiatric candidate to perceive conspiracies. To the extent that you and I place a strong, positive value on anything -- like property, privacy, scholarly excellence, security, moral behavior, etc. -- and to the extent

that you and I are susceptible to someone's claim that a conspiracy is the cause of our perceived and imminent threat.

It seems to me, however, that a rhetorical critic of a reform movement must have some way to assess conspiracy appeals which he is likely to encounter. That is, a critic should be able to determine whether the appeals have any factual basis and whether or not a conspiracy is a valid explanation for the imminent danger perceived by the reformers. The problem is lessened if the reform movement is an historical one because a critic usually has access to more evidence. For example, the conspiracy of Nazi officers to assasinate Hitler was clearly a real conspiracy and sufficient evidence is now available to substantiate the claim. How then might a critic of an on-going reform movement distinguish between an actual conspiracy and -- what I will call -- a psychological conspiracy?

To do so, I suggest that the critic --

(1) determine whether the alleged conspirators have a <u>specific</u> identity. The more amorphous the designation given to the alleged conspirators, i.e., "the Insiders," "the Red Menace," "the Select Few," or worst of all, "them," the more likely the conspiracy is psychological.

(2) Determine whether the alleged conspirators had the <u>opportunity to plot</u>. If not, a conspiracy can't exist.

(3) Determine whether all the intended "victims" agree that sufficient evidence exists to verify the existence of conspiracy. Disagreement would suggest that an actual conspiracy is unlikely.

(4) determine whether the alleged conspirators cooperate in making evidence available to those in the reform movement. Destroying or concealing evidence would indicate the probability of an actual conspiracy.

(5) determine whether all of the alleged conspirators would secure equal gains from successfully carrying out the plot, or would suffer equal losses from unsuccessfully carrying out the plot. Inequity of gain or loss would suggest that an actual conspiracy is unlikely.

(6) determine whether the alleged conspiracy is used to explain disparate and discrete past events. Actual conspiracies usually have a single, specific objective; psychological conspiracies tend to be repetitive, long-term, and serve to explain a vast array of events.

These criteria can hardly be said to have infallible power. But they do provide some guidelines for making an important distinction in our analysis of the place of conspiracy appeals in a social movement.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Cf. Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, (Cambridge, 1967); Eric Hoffer, The True Believer, (New York, 1951); Wm. Baum, The Conspiracy Theory of Politics of the Radical Right in the U.S., (Ann Arbor, 1960); Richard Curry and Thomas Brown, (eds.), Conspiracy: The Fear of Subversion in American History, (New York, 1972); Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator, (New York, 1949); J. Anthony Lukas, The Barnyard Epithet and Other Obscenities: Notes on the Chicago Conspiracy Trial, (New York, 1970).

[2]J. W. Bryan, "The Development of the English Law of Conspiracy," in Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, XXVII (Baltimore, 1909), pp. 9-10ff.

[3]Jason Epstein, The Great Conspiracy Trial, (New York, 1971), p. 87.

[4]Talcott Parsons, "McCarthism and American Social Tensions: A Sociologist's View," Yale Review, XLIV (Dec., 1954), Cf. R. Sokol, "Power Orientation and McCarthism," American Journal of Sociology, LXXIII (Jan., 1968).

[5]Gary Allen, None Dare Call it Conspiracy, (Concord Press, 1971) pp. 7-8.

[6]Franz Neumann, "Anxiety in Politics," Dissent II (Spring, 1955), pp. 133-143.

[7]Hans Toch, The Social Psychology of Social Movements, ( ), ch. 3.

[8]Milton Rokeach, The Open and the Closed Mind, (New York, 1960) p. 395ff.

[9]Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Rasb, The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970, (New York, 1970).